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ABSTRACT

The major problem faced by those who would evaluate teaching has been the difficulty of defining teaching effectiveness or establishing criteria for measurement. Traditionally, evaluations have focused on teacher performance in the classroom or on teacher traits as the criteria of effectiveness. However, previous studies have indicated that learning can occur in the presence of different teacher traits ("warm" or "cold", "authoritarian" or "permissive") and as a result of various methods (lecture, group discussion, or no teaching activity at all). Hence, the literature has promoted evaluation based on a "teaching-learning" paradigm which requires that teaching be defined as the activity which causes learning. A previous study, conducted by the author and based on questionnaires sent to 933 full-time faculty and administrators in nine randomly selected Illinois Public Community Colleges, indicated that though teacher performance was ranked as the number one basis for evaluation, 59% rated student learning as the best single indicator of teaching effectiveness. However, these same respondents also indicated that they believed that there was a connection between student learning and teacher behavior and that effective teachers did things differently in the classroom than non-effective teachers. (MB)

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CAN STUDENT LEARNING BE USED TO EVALUATE COLLEGE TEACHING?

JC 790 077

by Kenneth Gibson

In this study of the perceptions of academic administrators and full-time teaching faculty in Illinois Public Community Colleges, the author found surprising support for the use of student learning as the criterion of teaching effectivenesss most appropriate for evaluating faculty. Most of the educators surveyed also agreed that teacher traits (intelligence, personality, experience) were given more emphasis in evaluating faculty than they should be given.

In spite of the many evaluation models and theories, few community colleges have come to terms with the extremely difficulty task of evaluating a faculty member's teaching effort. In Confronting Identity Cohen pointed out the lack of validity of present evaluation schemes. "The practice (evaluation) fails to differentiate between the teacher as a social being and the teacher as one who causes learning. It serves no useful purpose."[1] To administrators faced with the prospect of evaluating thousands of teachers each year, Cohen's conclusion seems particularly disturbing. Although the rising tide of unionism in community colleges might tend to substitute seniority for merit in evaluation systems, the current impetus of accountability has stimulated community colleges to intensify the use of evaluation. And, if we are to continue to evaluate, we must face those obstacles that threaten the integrity of the process. What are some of the problems in current evaluation practices that cause educators like Arthur Cohen to feel that the process serves "no useful purpose"?

Probably, the major problem faced by those who would evaluate teaching has been the difficulty of defining teaching effectiveness or establishing criteria for measurement. Without such criteria any measurement is meaningless; without an accepted definition of effectiveness any action is as valid as any other action.

Traditionally, evaluations have focused on teacher performance in the classroom or on teacher traits as the criteria of effectiveness. The focus has been on the instructor rather than on the student. The measure of excellence has been what the instructor does, rather than what the student learns.

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[1]Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, Confronting Identity: The Community College Instructor (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 198.

In sum, most of these evaluations have related teaching effectiveness to certain actions and attitudes of teachers. However, using classroom performance or teacher traits to evaluate teaching can only be successful if efforts to establish a relationship between classroom performance, teacher traits and effective teaching are successful.

And Johnson, commenting on the many attempts to correlate particular traits of teachers or particular classroom techniques with learning outcomes, concluded that such efforts have only reaffirmed the obvious. "We found only that 'learning' occurs in the presence of 'warm' teachers and 'cold' teachers, 'authoritarian' teachers and 'permissive' teachers, and apparently as the result of lectures ('good' or 'bad'), 'group discussions,' independent 'discovery methods,' or no 'teaching' activity at all."[2]

The solution seems simple enough. If we can't prove that we are measuring effective teaching by measuring classroom performance or by determining whether the teacher possesses certain traits, then why not simply measure whether students learn or not? Why not use students' gain in knowledge and skills to evaluate a teacher's performance? Morrison suggested this approach when he pointed out that many educators were beginning to believe that "evidence for teaching competence is to be found in observation of student behavior, not teacher behavior."[3] Those educators were not alone; they were finding support in the courts. Commenting on California's Stull Act and the Supreme Court decision in Griggs et al. v. Duke Power Co., Johnson noted the tendency for legislators and the courts to support a type of evaluation which demands the

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[2]Henry C. Johnson, Jr. "Court, Craft, and Competence," Phi Delta Kappan, LVII (May, 1976), 608.

[3]Edward J. Morrison, "Performance Observation as an Approach to Teacher Evaluation," Educational Horizons, LII (Summer, 1974), 168.

measurement of "competence as it relates to the established standards of student progress."[4]

Cohen and Brawer have long promoted the use of student gain as a measure of teaching effectiveness most appropriate for community colleges. Because community colleges are teaching institutions, it seems appropriate that they would emphasize teaching and the evaluation of teaching, but according to Cohen and Brawer, not only should community colleges stress the evaluation of teaching, they should also stress evaluation using student gain. Such evaluation would be based on a "teaching-learning" paradigm. This paradigm requires that teaching be defined as the activity which causes learning. "Unless learning...occurs, by definition there has been no teaching. Simply calling the junior college a teaching institution is not enough."[5] Cohen and Brawer conclude that the mature and professional instructor will want to be judged on the basis of student gain.

In spite of such confidence, there seems to be no clear evidence that such a system of evaluation has been accepted in the community college. Gilley commented that "there is no question but that most serious students of teaching and learning feel that a well-designed method of measuring student learning is the only way to measure teacher effectiveness." Yet, after an exhaustive three-year study and a survey of community colleges in twelve states, he had to conclude that only a few colleges made any attempt to measure student learning.[6] However, a recent study completed by this author, suggests that faculty and

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[4]Johnson, p. 607.

[5]Cohen and Brawer, p. 23.

[6]J. Wade Gilley, Evaluation and Motivation of Community College Personnel, (Gainesville, Florida: ERIC Clearinghouse, University of Florida, Center For State and Regional Leadership, May, 1972), p. 3. Microfiche, ED 060-850.

administrators in community colleges today might be receptive to student gain as the measure of teaching effectiveness.

When asked to indicate whether teaching performance in the classroom, teacher traits, or student learning was the basis for evaluation of teaching, community college teachers and administrators ranked teacher performance as the number one measure and student learning as the least important measure in current use.

However, when asked which of these three measures should be most important, the majority of the faculty and administrators (59.3%) rated student learning as the best single indicator of teaching effectiveness. Teacher performance was seen as the best indicator by a smaller number of respondents (31.4%), and teacher traits was seen as the best indicator by a very small number (3.6%). The remaining 5.7% either did not answer the question or checked more than one criterion. Thus, even though student learning was perceived to be the least important in present practice, the majority of this group of educators felt that it was the most effective.[7]

The respondents might have rated student learning even higher except that they were concerned about the difficulty of measuring what a student has learned. Seventeen respondents commented that their response was influenced by the impossibility of measuring student learning. One respondent summed up this concern rather graphically: "But I don't know how to measure this and I haven't seen

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[7]This study was based on a questionnaire sent to 933 full-time faculty and academic administrators in 9 randomly selected Illinois Public Community Colleges, and returned by 467 (50.1%) educators in the summer of 1977. Full statistics and results are available from the author or in dissertation form from University microfilms. The dissertation is entitled: The Practice of Faculty Evaluation: Perceptions of Full-Time Teaching Faculty and Academic Administrators in Illinois Public Community Colleges.

much evidence anybody does--except at the Mickey Mouse level." In spite of the fact that they give hundreds of grades a year, faculty seemed to feel that there is no effective way to tell if a student has learned or why he has or has not learned.

In order to explore why faculty members and administrators felt as they did, they were asked to react to ten statements gleaned from the literature on evaluation, each statement emphasizing either classroom performance, teacher traits, or student learning as the best measure of teaching effectiveness.

The ratings of the statements clearly indicated that faculty and administrators did not believe that the use of teacher traits was the best way to evaluate, even though they acknowledged that it was more important than student learning in current practice. They did not feel that this criterion was effective because they did not agree that the "good" person was a "good" teacher, or that what a person was, was more important than what he or she did.

However, the educators seemed to be ambivalent about the use of student gain versus teacher performance. Over 59 percent of the respondents selected student learning as the best indicator of teaching effectiveness; however, their responses indicated that they also believed that there was a connection between student learning and teacher behavior and that good or effective teachers did things differently in the classroom than bad or non-effective teachers. Their responses suggested that community college teachers and administrators would accept both product and process definitions of teaching, i.e., "teaching as that activity that causes learning," and "teaching as the activity performed by a teacher."

Community college faculty and administrators agreed that student learning

was the best indicator of teaching effectiveness, but they also felt that it was difficult to measure student learning. Since they believed that certain teacher actions in the classroom were related to student learning, one way to avoid the difficulty of measuring student learning appears to be to measure teacher behavior. Faculty and administrators seem to acknowledge realistically that it is very difficult to measure student learning accurately or to determine what factors contribute to that learning; therefore, they accept the observations of a teacher's performance in class as an approximation of the amount of student learning that is taking place. They agreed that "to create an atmosphere conducive to growth is the extent of the school's responsibility," suggesting that the teacher was responsible only for his behavior in class, but at the same time agreed as strongly that "to produce change in student behavior is the goal of education." Further, they agreed that "evaluation must be objective, based on outcomes, not the subjective impression of raters," but agreed as strongly that the "ratings of students, colleagues, supervisors, and the instructor are the best means of evaluating teachers."

While the participants in the study seemed ambivalent in their attitudes toward evaluation based on student gain or teacher performance, they were consistent in their response to the use of teacher traits: they uniformly disagreed with the statements that the good person was a good teacher and that we should evaluate teachers on the basis of their personality, college degrees, grades, or years of experience. Also, they were undecided about, and very close to disagreeing with, the statement that "more important than what a teacher accomplishes, and more important than what he or she does, is what he or she is."

Ultimately, the confusion over what is effective teaching, or over how we

measure an individual teacher's contribution to a student's learning, must become a challenge and not an obstacle. The potential of the community college will be realized only if the effectiveness of its faculty is realized. One way to improve the effectiveness of the faculty is to improve and intensify efforts at evaluating faculty performance using student learning as a criterion. If effective evaluation can generate effective teaching, then such evaluation is worth the effort, the time, and the money it will take to prepare evaluators and to organize evaluation processes. Ironically, evaluation in higher education suffers from the same malady that afflicts teaching: we have not taught teachers to teach, and we have not prepared evaluators to evaluate. In community colleges, evaluation must be conducted by professionals, so teaching will be performed by professionals. But that is another story.

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